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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 001521

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/10/2017

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [RP](#)

SUBJECT: WHAT'S AT STAKE IN THE MAY 14 PHILIPPINE ELECTIONS

REF: A. MANILA 1494

[B](#). MANILA 1467

[C](#). MANILA 1215

[D](#). MANILA 1073

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney, reason 1.4 (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. Philippine democracy faces both familiar and new challenges in the mid-term elections on May 14, even without the dramatic element of a Presidential campaign. U.S. interests remain focused on the success of democratic processes. The outcome of the elections will not in any meaningful way affect our close ties and cooperation with the government, which will remain pro-American and anti-terrorism. Philippine citizens seek -- and are mobilizing to ensure -- more free, fair, and transparent elections, although the levels of violence are already of concern, and there are already widespread expectations of cheating again this year. A top goal for the Arroyo Administration is to ensure sufficient Congressional seats to block future impeachment motions against President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, especially since opposition forces will likely dominate the new Senate. President Arroyo's allies may be relying on new pro-Administration "party list" representatives not only to help protect her against impeachment but also as leverage against possible challenges within her coalition related to charter change that could limit her powers or term of office. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) In June 2007, the Philippines will celebrate the centennial of the founding of a Philippine legislature. Its democratic history has had its ups and downs -- with memories of the Marcos-era martial law still haunting the older generation, notably when legislators deliberated extensively before passing the landmark counterterrorism "Human Security Act of 2007." The Philippines' democratic history is inherently linked with the United States, first as a democratic model and more recently as a partner in the Community of Democracies and other fora. The May 14 mid-term elections (reftels) are the next stage in the Philippines' democratic evolution, as well as an opportunity to demonstrate to the region and the world that the Philippines remains committed to a democratic path. The challenges are at once familiar and new.

U.S. interests

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[1](#)3. (C) As we consistently tell our public and private audiences here, the U.S. strongly supports Philippine democracy, encourages civic responsibility and voter participation, and does not engage in any partisan politics. We make very clear that we will observe -- with a team of over 80 Mission observers accredited by the Philippine Commission on Elections (COMELEC) -- with great interest the

democratic processes in action for the mid-term elections. We also underscore that the U.S. will not judge or validate the outcome, which is the sovereign role of Philippine institutions and Philippine civil society. We also hope for the most free, fair, and transparent elections possible -- and believe that we have contributed, in part, through our long-standing technical assistance through USAID to the COMELEC -- and we encourage those in the Philippines who seek to improve their own democratic processes further. We have expressed concern about political violence again in this year's election, as well as our hope that the culprits will face justice, just as those allegedly engaged in unlawful or extrajudicial killings of leftists, journalists, and judges should.

14. (C) Our key interest is that the Philippines continues on its democratic course, and does not veer off into military adventurism or attempted coups d'etat that seek to subvert the democratic system, however flawed it may appear to many -- perhaps even most -- Philippine citizens. At the same time, we have no interest in covering up the warts of Philippine democratic procedures and institutions, but do have an interest in continuing whatever assistance we can provide to the COMELEC and civil society groups who seek to improve the electoral process.

15. (C) The electoral outcome is virtually irrelevant to the U.S. We are confident that we will continue to encounter excellent cooperation and overwhelmingly pro-U.S. sentiments from whatever slate of new Congressmen, governors, and local officials emerge from these elections, whether pro-Administration or Opposition. One common aspiration among candidates -- and the public -- is for a more peaceful and prosperous Philippines, and there is widespread

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recognition across the political spectrum (apart from the Communist Party of the Philippines) that the U.S. is a natural partner and generous ally in these endeavors.

Philippine interests  
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16. (C) With the alleged cheating scandals from the 2004 Presidential election still fresh in many voters' minds, thoughtful Philippine citizens seek more concerted efforts by both the COMELEC and civil society groups to crack down on violations of election laws, whether at the ballot box or during the canvassing phases moving from local to national levels. The failure of Congress to pass legislation on automation in time for implementation in these elections was a blow to more serious-minded reformers; they now must focus instead on the 2010 Presidential, national, and local elections. The mobilization of more than one million volunteers to monitor their own elections, as well as the key role played by tens of thousands of public school teachers as election day workers (since most polling places are in schools), is a testament to the desire of ordinary Philippine citizens to ensure the best elections possible.

17. (C) The Administration shares these goals, but clearly has some more partisan calculations of its own also at stake. Paramount to President Arroyo and her supporters is ensuring sufficient seats in Congress to ward off almost inevitable new impeachment charges in the next Congress, as in 2005 and 2006. Pro-Administration coalition parties have made sure that they are present in all Congressional districts, with the dominant Lakas/Christian-Muslim-Democrat Party under House Speaker Jose de Venecia alone fielding candidates for all seats in Congress, as well as for 80 of the 81 provincial slots. Lakas officials predict that they will win at least 98 of the 220 Congressional seats, especially since their candidates are running unopposed or against a weak candidate in 21 districts in Luzon, 26 districts in the Visayas, 40 districts in Mindanao, and 12 in Metro Manila. At the provincial and local levels, superb political organization by

Lakas and other pro-Administration parties virtually ensures that pro-Administration candidates will win heavily.

18. (C) Speaker de Venecia likely has "charter change" plans for his party's expected plurality in the lower House that may not entirely suit President Arroyo, however. He continues to advocate a transformation to a parliamentary system, with possible power-sharing between a prime minister -- the job he covets -- and a president (probably "grandfathering" in the incumbent until the end of her term in 2010). While President Arroyo and other Malacanang leaders have in the past voiced support for such change, their enthusiasm has been increasingly guarded and appears to have diminished since she survived the 2006 impeachment effort. She may view de Venecia's plans with increased suspicion, fueled by advice of caution from various close advisors. This may explain the emergence of apparent new Administration-backed or -linked "party list" organizations (ref c). These possible additional new representatives, if indeed victors from the elections and if firmly behind the Administration, could not only give the President more protection from new impeachment measures but also more leverage with de Venecia and his allies in Lakas.

19. (C) The Opposition nonetheless has expressed confidence that it may win at least 80 Congressional seats from its 151 candidates nationwide -- enough, in principle, to pass a vote of impeachment for Senate deliberation. There is already widespread expectation that Opposition and Independent candidates will dominate the new Senate, making it all the more imperative to Malacanang to ensure that an impeachment never reaches the Senate.

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